

Run to Win the Prize // 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

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[0:00] The letter of 1 Corinthians is a treasure. It contains more teaching on the resurrection, spiritual gifts, marriage, and the virtue of love than any other book in the Bible.

But it is not cold theology. 1 Corinthians is an urgent call for us to remember the gospel. And as a result, it's a call for us to be a cross-centered, holy, and united people until he returns.

Listen in to what God has to say to us through this inspired letter. Amen. Amen. If you would remain standing, I'm going to read our scripture for today. You can follow along with the screen behind me. Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.

Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

[1:08] So I do not run aimlessly. I do not box as one beating the air, but I discipline my body and keep it under control.

Lest after preaching to others, I myself shall be disqualified. May God bless the preaching, the hearing, and the obeying of his word.

Please be seated. Such a joy to open the scriptures together this morning and study this passage, which just happens to come next in 1 Corinthians for us.

Well, the coach blew the whistle, and every player stepped up to the line. Cleats were tied. Pads were on. Helmets were fastened.

And every player was ready to run. There was much anticipation. Nerves were high. High hearts were beating fast. The way Roger Bannister and John Landry felt as they climbed into the blocks for the Miracle Mile.

[2:15] Perhaps the way Ali and Frazier felt as they stepped into the ring for the thriller of In Manila. And definitely the way every UT player felt right before they ran through the tee.

There was anticipation to run. There was also dread. Not everyone was going to win. Some were going to lose, and the stakes were high.

Whether more out of anticipation or more out of dread, every player was ready to run. And I was in the seventh grade. The one year I played tackle football.

It was the end of practice, and every one of the 50 players on the team, or some odd players, had to run 100 yards with all the pads on.

But the last five players to cross the line had to do it again. Though I weighed only 120 pounds and played only a few snaps all year, I stepped up to the line ready to give it my all.

[3:23] And when the whistle blew, I ran harder than I think I have ever run since then. I'm 46 years old now. Running not so much to win as running to not lose.

And I must say, I never lost the end of practice 100-yard dash. It may well be the peak of my athletic career. I peaked early.

Bo peaked a little bit later. Well, in these verses, the Word of God urges us to view the Christian life like a race to run. To go all out to the finish.

To run that you may attain the prize. Now, running a race would have resonated with the first recipients of this letter. It was written to a church in Corinth. That's modern-day Greece, ancient Greece.

Corinth was a new, wealthy, large, prosperous city. But it was also a city all about sports. It was home to the Isthmian Games because it was on the Isthmus.

[4:29] Every two years, people came in. Crowds came in to watch the Isthmian Games. Sports took a central place in Corinth. The culture was consumed with sports.

One writer says, the people only demanded two things of the people that ruled over them. Bread and games. That's all they wanted for the country to be successful, or the city to be successful. Bread and games. One author quotes, by day they stood idle. In the evening they watched sports. And I guess some things never change.

And so it would have immediately resonated with these guys when the Apostle Paul took up this analogy to live the Christian life like you're running a race. But it resonates with us as well. Whether your sport is football, or basketball, track, or tennis, pickleball, or volleyball, baseball, or jujitsu, or something like that, we all know the sound of the whistle.

We all know the feeling of going all out for the next play, the next quarter, the next lap, the next point, trying to get as much done before time expires.

[5:44] And we are to live the Christian life with the same resolve and intensity. Even more so. If you're a young man or woman just climbing into the block, so to speak, to start the race, these verses are for you to urge you to lay it all on the line, to do it all out for Christ.

Or perhaps you're a little bit older. A few laps into the race, a few years into following Christ, these verses are for you. Don't forget, you're in a race.

Don't begin to look to the right or left. I know some have left off from the race, but you must not give up. These verses, though, are not just vivid to the youngest among us, or the middle-aged among us, but even the oldest, perhaps those in the final lap, even into the final stretch in these verses. Soon you will be with the Lord, but now you are not with Him. Don't coast into the finish. These verses urge you in comfort and ease. Your energy may not be what it was before, but press on towards the prize.

These verses speak to all of us. This is God speaking. You want to hear the voice of God? He's speaking right now to all of us, calling us to live all of life, all for Christ.

[7:07] Christ. Live all of life, all for Christ. There's an all-in nature to this text. We're going to just break it out in three words, and I want you to remember. The race, the regimen, the reward.

The race, the regimen, and the reward. These verses urge us to live a Christian life like we're running a race by comparing life to a race. Look down there, verse 24. Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize?

That's meant to be just kind of a captain obvious question. Do you not know that all the runners run to get the prize? Yes, of course. We all gather into the stadium to watch the race.

We know how a race works. I mean, a foot race might be the easiest sport to understand. If you're like me, you're watching the World Cup so confused. And yet, a foot race, a track race, the most easy to understand.

They jump off the blocks. They run around and around as many times as required until they hit that finish line. And so, Paul says, run that you may obtain the prize.

[8:14] In other words, life is like running a race. But how is life like running a race? Now, we often hear the slogan. I'm an SEC fan, so I hear it a lot.

Sports are more than a game. It's more than a game. But what in the world do we mean by that? Now, it doesn't mean sports are more than one game.

In sports, you play one game at a time. You can't play our next week's game tonight. You've got to play the game before you. And that game never happens again. So sports cannot mean more than one game.

Nor do we say sports is more than a game because the game doesn't matter. Can you imagine going to Coach K and saying, sorry, I didn't block on that last play. I know they scored a touchdown, but I needed a blow.

After all, sports are more than a game, Coach. I have a feeling how that conversation would end. Sports is more than a game because it can teach you a secret about life.

[9:19] The secret is you only have one life. You only have one chance. You only climb into the blocks once.

And what you do is your decision. When I was growing up, we used to play a certain Eminem song before the game.

Now, as a disclaimer, though I know he's quite talented, and though that was a long time ago, I cannot commend Eminem to you. But it began, if you only had one shot or one opportunity to seize everything you wanted in one moment, would you capture it?

The chorus, lose yourself in the moment. Saying there's one life. Go all in. In the game, that's all you got. Every game, you got one shot. One opportunity.

And the same is true of life. John Piper tells the lesson he learned as a young boy. His dad was an evangelist, which just meant he traveled from home to preach the gospel in different places.

[10:31] So he would go and preach and come back to the family and tell about what God was doing in different parts of the world. And he told the story that one night there was an older man nearing the end of his life who came to the Lord.

And he was in the meeting, Bill Piper's in the meeting, and this man came to the Lord. This was a man that everyone knew in the community. An infamous man who had opposed Christ for many, many years.

A man the people in the church had prayed for for many, many years. And so you can imagine everyone's amazement when this man walked down the aisle to Mr. Piper and humbled himself and gave his life to Jesus Christ.

No greater decision you could make. And after giving his life to Christ, after learning the joy of total forgiveness and true peace, the man began to weep.

He was startling to the congregation as this man that they knew had opposed Christ for so many years began to weep. But he wasn't weeping tears of joy. He was weeping and through his tears saying, I've wasted it.

[11:41] I've wasted it. I've wasted it. I've wasted my life. Sports is more than a game because it can teach you the secret.

You only have one life. You only have one chance. You only have one opportunity. And if you only have one opportunity, that means you can waste it. You can waste your opportunity.

You can waste your chance. You can waste your life. The reality of this, you can waste your life by failing in something, or you can waste your life by succeeding in something that does not ultimately matter.

That's what Coach Cato was saying. He wasted his life by achieving these things. It all passed away. Monday morning, there's another game, and it doesn't matter anymore. But this, not merely the startling reality that you can waste your life.

You only have one chance. But this is what I want you to see. Regardless of how young or old you are, you've been given life, and you're in the game. Like, you are in the game.

[12:46] The story's not written. The end has not come. And so I want to urge you to go all in. One of our presidents, Teddy Roosevelt, said this, In life, as in a football game, the principle to follow is hit the line hard.

Don't foul and don't shirk, but hit the line hard. Football has a lot to teach you about life. Hit the line hard. You only got one chance, and you're in the race of go all in.

Point two, the regimen. The race and the regimen. These verses urge us to live the Christian life like we're running a race by comparing life to a race.

And life's like running a race because you only have one shot. Life is like running a race because you've got to follow the regimen if you want to win. Look where Paul goes next when he says, Every athlete, verse 25, exercises self-control in all things.

Now we see the runner in verse 24 in the race. Do you not know that all the runners run to win the prize? We see him in the race there, but we see him in the weight room here. We're seeing what's going on behind and before the race right here.

[14:00] The runner who wins begins his training long before the start. The runner follows a careful regimen, strength and conditioning, training, rich food. Running the race, if you don't train, is worthless.

You might get a bib. That's what they call those things the runners run in. You might have some fancy new shoes or a headband, a moisture-wicking hat, or something like that.

But you are going to lose. You might as well not even suit up. A runner needs strict self-control. Last March, British runner Josh Kerr said that he would break the one-mile record.

This is March of 25. And on July 18th, he did it. He ran a mile in England in three minutes and 42 seconds.

Strikingly, Kerr was interviewed afterwards. He said the challenge was not the race. He said, and it's fascinating because for two of the laps, you have a pacer with you.

[15:05] So right in front of you, the pacer. He ran through two pacers. He didn't run through them. But they couldn't hang with the pace, and so they had to drop out. He said the challenge wasn't the race. He said he almost glided to the finish.

The challenge was the training. He called it Project 222. Because that's how many seconds he needed to run a mile in. That puts it in perspective, doesn't it?

So all the training he did at different altitudes, working, trying to break this record that has stood for 27 years. You know, the mile is not like an important race in Olympics or any of those things. But it is very famous in the history of humankind, a strict regimen. And so a runner needs self-control, and so too does a believer. After considering the self-control of athletes, the Apostle Paul talks about his own pursuit of self-control.

Look down there in verse 27. He says, I discipline my body and keep it under control. Now, he's been using the analogy of running. We saw that in 24 and 25.

[16:08] And then he adds this analogy of boxing. Look up in verse 26. I do not run aimlessly. I do not box as one beating the air. So he's holding up running and boxing alongside of you.

Those are both sports. It would have been the Isthmian games. So he's saying, I run with a goal in mind. Now, some people just go out to run and wonder where they run. But he's running with a goal in mind, trying to hit a certain time, a certain mark, certain splits.

And he boxes with a target in mind. Can you imagine just swinging in the air? Know what he's saying? I'm punching the bag in certain places. I'm punching the mitt in certain places. But look what he says in verse 27.

So I don't run aimlessly. I don't box aimlessly. I discipline my body. Literally, I beat my body. I punch myself.

Actually, the word means I give a black eye to myself. Now, don't talk to your shrink about that or you'll get in trouble.

[17:09] That's not going to fit with the self-help of this culture. He says, I keep my body under control. Literally, he says, I make my body my slave. My doulas.

Now, we shouldn't imagine the Apostle Paul punching himself like Jim Carrey did in Liar Liar. What he means is, I'm willing to live in a way different than everyone else so that I can live with all my life for Christ.

What he's accenting is his willingness. No one's pressing into this. He's willingness to live in a way unlike anybody else so they can live all of life for Christ. And we must live the same way.

We must live in a way different from everyone else. We must be self-controlled. Now, self-control begins in a place you might not think. It doesn't actually begin in the weight room.

It begins in the mind. If the Apostle Paul were here to talk about self-control and the mind, I have no doubt where he would begin. He would begin talking about distraction. He'd begin talking about our handheld distraction devices.

[18:21] We'd pick up our phone 2,617 times a day. On average, that means some of us. Our way above average. This is not a category you want to be above average in.

The constant connectivity has eroded our attention and our ability to concentrate. One study says our attention span is now only eight seconds. One less second than a goldfish.

That little thing that lives two weeks and dies. He's got you on attention. That's a little scary, isn't it? But the idea that the phone is just the beginning.

It's so easy to get in the rhythm where all of life is online. School online. Connect with friends online. Watch movies online. Play games online. Shop online. Date online. The trouble is not just a frayed, frazzled life that results from distraction.

The main trouble is what's not in our minds. The Bible alerts us because all of our life flows from our minds. So it says set your mind on things above.

[19:21] Colossians 3. Do not be conformed but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.

Romans 12. I would strongly encourage you, especially the young among us, to set parameters for your online life.

Make your phone as dumb as possible. Limit social media if you can't eliminate it altogether. Begin the day with the Word of God.

You're never too young to get serious about your relationship with God. Meditate on the Word. If you can doom scroll, you've got plenty of time to meditate on the Word of God. But the reality is not many of us who are old are much further from this issue and this need to begin with our minds.

Self-control. It continues into our hearts. Self-control continues into, when I say the heart, it's talking about biblically. The heart is kind of what makes you you. It's where you fear and love and worship and trust and all these things.

It all flows from your heart. Now, years ago, Hollywood actor Woody Allen had an affair with his adopted daughter, which is despicable. In defense of his actions, he said, the heart wants what it wants.

[20 : 31] Now, that's atrocious. And yet, we live in the same way most days. We believe that what we feel is right.

We believe it's right to say what we feel and do what we feel because what we feel, we feel is right. And anyone tells us we're wrong for something we feel that we ought to do for what we feel is right. We're angry. But as Christians, we're meant to order right from wrong, not by the basis of our feeling, but by the word of God. Submit our feelings to the word of God.

Last year, I read a fascinating book called *Bad Therapy, Why Kids Aren't Growing Up*. It said to parents, you should never, ever ask your child, how do you feel today?

Now, did you ask that question today? It's one of the worst questions you could ask, he said, or she said. Why? Because you're training them to believe that nothing is more important than the way they feel.

[21 : 37] Decisions are made. Commitments hang and swing in the balance of, how do I feel today? Instead of asking, how do you feel? Scriptures would reprove us and encourage us to ask, what does the word of God say?

What do I believe? What is true? The rightly ordered person, emotionally, is not the one that goes to the shrink more often. The rightly ordered person is the one that orders their emotional world by the word of God.

Self-control flows out of our hearts as we come to the scriptures and submit our feelings, our desires, our plans, our wishes, our fears, our wants, all these things to the word of God.

So how do we not vent in anger? How do we not indulge in porn when we feel sorry for ourselves? How do we resist sulking and pouting when we don't get our way?

You can be very old and still sulk and pout. It just looks a little bit different. Not banging your fist on the ground or something. How do we resist slander when we're hurt?

[22 : 41] How do we not let our feelings dictate whether we pray or read or go to church or visit that friend or make that meal? By coming to the scriptures and submitting what we feel to the word of God.

Again and again and again. Don't ask what I feel. What do I believe? What do I believe? Self-control continues in our actions.

Self-control continues. It must result in action. We can play Christianity in our mind and heart. But what we do proves whether we're a Christian or not.

Every tree bears fruit. A good tree bears good fruit. But a Z's tree bears bad fruit. Z's tree can't bear good fruit. Nor can a good tree bear bad fruit.

And so self-control results in diligence and discipline. Martin Lloyd-Jones, British preacher, once said, I defy you to read the life of any saint that has ever adorned the life of the church without seeing at once that the greatest characteristic in the life of that saint was discipline and order.

[23 : 58] Discipline and order. Self-control means we do not live the life we could live or the life we sometimes want to live because we're living all of life all for Christ.

Self-control means we do not stay up as late as we could because we want to encounter God in the morning. Self-control means we do not eat as much as we could because we want to be a living sacrifice. Self-control means we do not watch what we could because we want to be a holy temple. Self-control means we do not do all the things we could because we made fixed commitments to our Lord and to the church. And the context of this is so vivid, so important. Paul is talking to this church that's kind of divided on secondary things.

That's the way churches do it. People don't leave churches because of the doctrine. They leave because of the coffee. They leave because something small that they don't like is out of order and they get out of here. Something like that. So they start having these little fights.

And so what was going on there, some people said you can eat meat, sacrifice the idol. Some said you couldn't. The people that said you could, they wanted to eat that meat. Who doesn't love meat? They wanted to eat it.

[25:03] They felt like they should eat it. They felt entitled to eat it. They felt it was their right to eat it. And yet when they ate it in the presence of those who were softer in conscience and did not think it was right to eat it, they hurt them.

So they would not even give up this little thing eating meat for the good of one another. And so to self-control is not so that we have flat abs, but so that we can remove every obstacle in the way of the gospel.

So we would be the ones to lay it down for the gospel, lay it down for others. I love it when we see this principle worked out in sports. I read about 2008 Western Oregon University.

Softball player Sarah Toklosky hit a 3-1 run homer her first of the year, hit a 3-1 run homer over the fence to give her team the lead.

While rounding first base, she missed the base, so she went back to touch the base so that the homer would count. She tore her ACL and fell flat.

[26:09] The rules in softball were that no one of her team could help her round the bases. Two members of the other team went and picked up Toklosky, one of them being the home run leader of the league, the division, carrying her around the other bases so that her homer, 3-run homer, could count.

Now, if that can happen in the world of sports, how much more should it happen among the body of Christ? How much more should we be willing to give of ourselves, our wants, our desires, our preferences, our freedoms to others?

What can we let go of? That's kind of what the scripture says. What can we let go of? What little thing can we let go of? You know, we get attached to the little thing. What can we let go of for the greater body of Christ and for one another?

So the race, the regimen, the regimen is required. If you want to win, finally the reward. These verses urge us to live the Christian life like running a race by comparing it to a race. Life gives you only one chance.

If you don't embrace the regimen, you're not going to win. And it's like running a race because there's a reward. Now, the reward emphasis is immediate. You see that in verse 24.

[27:31] Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Now, the point is not only those who place are welcomed into heaven.

Only those who are on the platform or the podium or something like that are welcomed into heaven. And that's not, that's where the analogy falls apart. That's not what the Apostle Paul is saying. He's saying just because you began the race doesn't mean you'll win.

The Christian life is not upward basketball is what Paul is saying. There's no participation trophy. You do not get a trophy for lacing up your shoes in the Christian life.

Why? Because the one who perseveres to the end, Christ said, will, or the one who endures to the end will be saved, he said. And so you got to press on to the end to receive the prize. And so the one who wins receives the prize.

Now, in the Isthmian games, the prize was a wreath. Those who win in the Olympics nowadays, they give them, and we saw this, right? They give them gold.

[28:36] They give them a medal, gold, silver, or bronze. But in the ancient days, they were crowned with a wreath of pine leaves or celery leaves. All were gathered to watch the crowning of the winner.

Crowning. You know, nowadays we play the national anthem while they receive this crowning. But Paul says it's perishable. Now, literally, then, it was just leaves.

So it faded and wilted. It withered and fell apart. And this is what happens with all the prizes the world has to offer. All the trophies and plaques that might sit on the shelf of our houses will eventually get relegated to the closet and the attic until someone finally throws them away.

All the gold and silver will finally lose its value. All fame and fortune, applause and adulation fades. Indeed, all that glitters is not gold.

So Paul says, don't run for the perishable reef. Run for the imperishable reef. Run for that which does not wilt or wither. Run for that which endures in the life to come.

[29:58] Now, threading throughout the New Testament is an emphasis upon living for the prize of the call of God in Christ Jesus. And we see this in Philippians 3.

I press on toward the upward call of God in Christ. Revelation 2. Blessed is the one who remains steadfast who will receive the crown of life. Or James 1. Be faithful and I will give you the crown of

life.

And so what these scriptures mean for us to have in mind is that on the final day, all who have loved not their life, all who have laid down their lives, all who have been faithful to the end will stand on a podium while all of heaven gathers in, leans in, looks on.

And the Lord who ran the race, the author and perfecter of our faith will give the crown. That's the crowning that will ultimately happen.

That's what all the reefs are pointing forward. And he won't give it to the great. He won't give it to the good. He won't give it to the perfect. Definitely not because there's none of them.

[31 : 00] He'll give it to those who are faithful to the very end. But it's here that self-control and self-denial, you know, Jesus says, if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, self-denial.

It's here that self-control and self-denial are seen in its appropriate light. God does not want us to have self-control and self-denial so that we're tough. Now, some guys think that's what's going on here. That's not the point.

God wants us to have self-control and self-denial so that we live for something greater. He wants us to live a life. If we're running a race, we're living a life that does not make sense in this one.

Not our best life now. It's a life devoted to Christ. It's a foolish life now. And so, the Christian life is like running a race because all of life is focused on that day.

I listened to this fascinating book last month called Born to Run. You know, it's not as bad as Eminem, but you might not want to listen to it. But Born to Run. I quoted one of these long-distance maniac runners in there who said, when I'm out on a long run, and if you've ran long, you know what this means.

[32 : 19] The only thing in life that matters is finishing the run. The only thing in life that matters is finishing the run.

Now, this text says, the only thing in life that matters is finishing the race.

It doesn't matter how many bays your garage has. It doesn't matter how nice your car is.

It doesn't matter how successful your career was. It doesn't matter how fat that 401k was or something like that. It doesn't matter who you sleep next to at night. It does not matter.

The only thing that matters is finishing. I want to urge you to live all of life, all for Christ.

[33 : 26] All of life. It's not going to look the same for each one of us. Hopefully not. Because we're not trying to make automatons or imitate one another. We're trying to press all of life, all for Christ in so many different spheres.

So this world is filled with the glory of Jesus Christ. So I want to urge you. I want to call you. I want to beg you to live all of life for Christ. The Christian life is like running a race.

And I want you to live all out. I want you to run all out. Now, so are you running hard? Are you still running?

Are you still running after him to know him and be found in him, to know the power of his resurrection? Are you still disciplining yourself? Are you still offering yourself up as a living sacrament?

Are you still saying to the Lord, Lord, I will go wherever you want me to go. I will be wherever you want me to be. I will do whatever you want me to do. Are you running hard?

[34 : 30] Are you running right? Are you running right? Are you running in the right direction? Are you in the race going the wrong direction?

Are you running after the right things? Have you begun to care too much about how you look? How you feel? How you measure up? Does your commitment to the Lord and his church still look like someone running a race?

It's so easy to drift out of the race. Paul says, fascinating. You say that word running later on this afternoon. He says, don't run in vain. You're running. Are you running in vain now? What's that mean?

You're just running around. I mean, you might be moving your feet, but you don't know where you're going. You're not running hard anymore, running right. The reality is many begin the race, but few finish well.

I've been a Christian for 25 years. Few finish well. I've seen so many drop out of the race. What happened? What happened to the joy? What happened?

[illegible]